



From Seneca Falls to the Polling Booth

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CHAPTER EIGHT: Ratification

The two branches of the suffrage movement had parted ways. The National American Woman Suffrage Association, now headed by Carrie Chapman Catt, believed it was best to work in a traditional political manner, while the National Women's Party, headed by Alice Paul, felt only public confrontation would bring change.

But their disagreement did not stop things from moving forward.

Both groups favored an amendment to the Constitution. Alice Paul's group worked only for that, the NAWSA worked both for individual states to approve suffrage and for the amendment.

President Wilson insisted he wanted individual states to make the choice, but, as Carrie Catt pointed out to him, an amendment would require three-quarters of the states to agree on it. The states could not say they hadn't had a chance to decide.

Meanwhile, the more states allowed women to vote, the harder it would be for the federal government to deny them.

The National Women's Party was better at getting headlines with its demonstrations, but two things happened to strengthen the NAWSA.

The first was that Miriam Leslie, who had been publisher of a major magazine, died in 1914 and left half her fortune to Carrie Chapman Catt for the purpose of working for women's suffrage.

The NAWSA had often been nearly broke. Now it was able to act with the power of a full-time organization.

The other was World War I. The National Women's Party continued to demonstrate during the war, often with posters calling on America to create true democracy at home before fighting to defend it overseas. The protesters were sometimes arrested, and their picketing struck many people as unpatriotic.

But, although the NAWSA also continued to work for suffrage, they put energy into supporting the war effort, just as suffragists had done during the Civil War.

And, just as had happened in the Civil War, the efforts of women in volunteer groups and in the workplace made people more aware of their ability to contribute to society.

Something else was happening, too: Even before the war, more state legislatures had begun allowing women to vote, at least in some elections, if not at all levels.

In New York State, the NAWSA put its new muscle behind a referendum for statewide suffrage, with women going door to door gathering over a million signatures of women who wanted to vote.

It may have been hard for President Wilson to ignore the silent demonstrators of the National Women's Party who stood outside the White House each day, but it was even harder for voters in New York to ignore a million signatures. In 1917, the Empire State, the most populous in the nation, approved women's suffrage.

In 1914, Montana had given women the vote and, in 1916, made Jeanette Rankin America's first congresswoman. In January, 1918, ten months before the end of the war, Rankin introduced the 19th Amendment in the House of Representatives, and it was approved by the necessary two-thirds majority.

Women cheered and celebrated, but the Senate would not accept it for nearly two more years.

By the end of the war, 11 states allowed women to vote, but women's suffrage still had strong opponents, from the liquor industry that feared they would favor Prohibition, from industries that did not want to pay women as much as they paid men and from Southern states that did not want to add to the number of African American voters.

When the amendment first came up for a vote in the Senate, President Wilson urged Senators to approve it, reminding them of the work women had just done for the nation: "We have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil, and not to a partnership of privilege and right?"

And yet it did not pass: Though it gained a strong majority, 62 to 34, it did not have the two-thirds it needed to be sent to the states for approval.

But the NAWSA continued the work of persuasion while the National Women's Party kept up their efforts to make ignoring women unpleasant and impossible, and both groups worked to prevent the re-election of politicians who opposed suffrage.

Finally, on June 4, 1919, the Senate voted on the Amendment again. By then, there were enough "Aye" votes that at least 10 Senators who favored it didn't even bother to show up. It still passed, by a vote of 56 to 25.

Now three-quarters of the legislatures of the 48 states would have to approve it.

Some voted quickly in favor; others, the suffragists knew, would never accept it, though the NAWSA worked even in those. Finally, it had been ratified in 35 states, and it seemed likely that Connecticut and Vermont would approve it, but their governors refused to call for a vote of their legislatures.

Then, on August 18, 1920, the Tennessee legislature took up the matter, and, as the vote came down, it was split 47-47, with only two votes left to be cast.

That was when a woman brought victory to the amendment: Harry Burn, a young legislator, stepped forward to vote, having just received a telegram from his mother, a suffragist who urged him to support the measure.

Which he did, and the Speaker of the House cast the final ballot also in favor, making women's suffrage the law of the nation.

And so, 72 years and a month after the Seneca Falls Convention, American women had finally won the right to vote.

However, as we said at the start of our history, the right to vote was only one piece in the larger struggle for true freedom and democracy.

History is never simple and it's never just about one thing.

And it's never over.